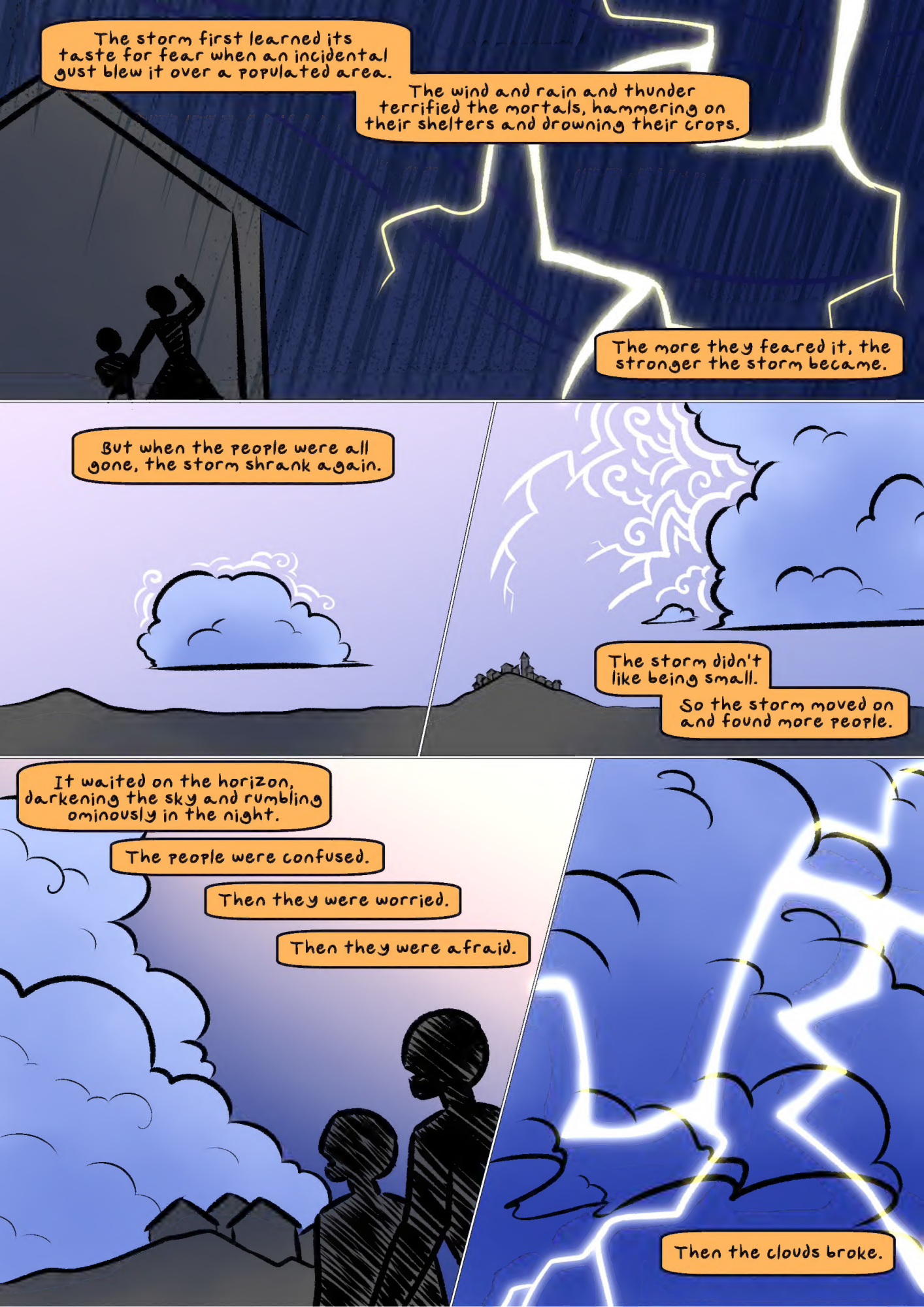
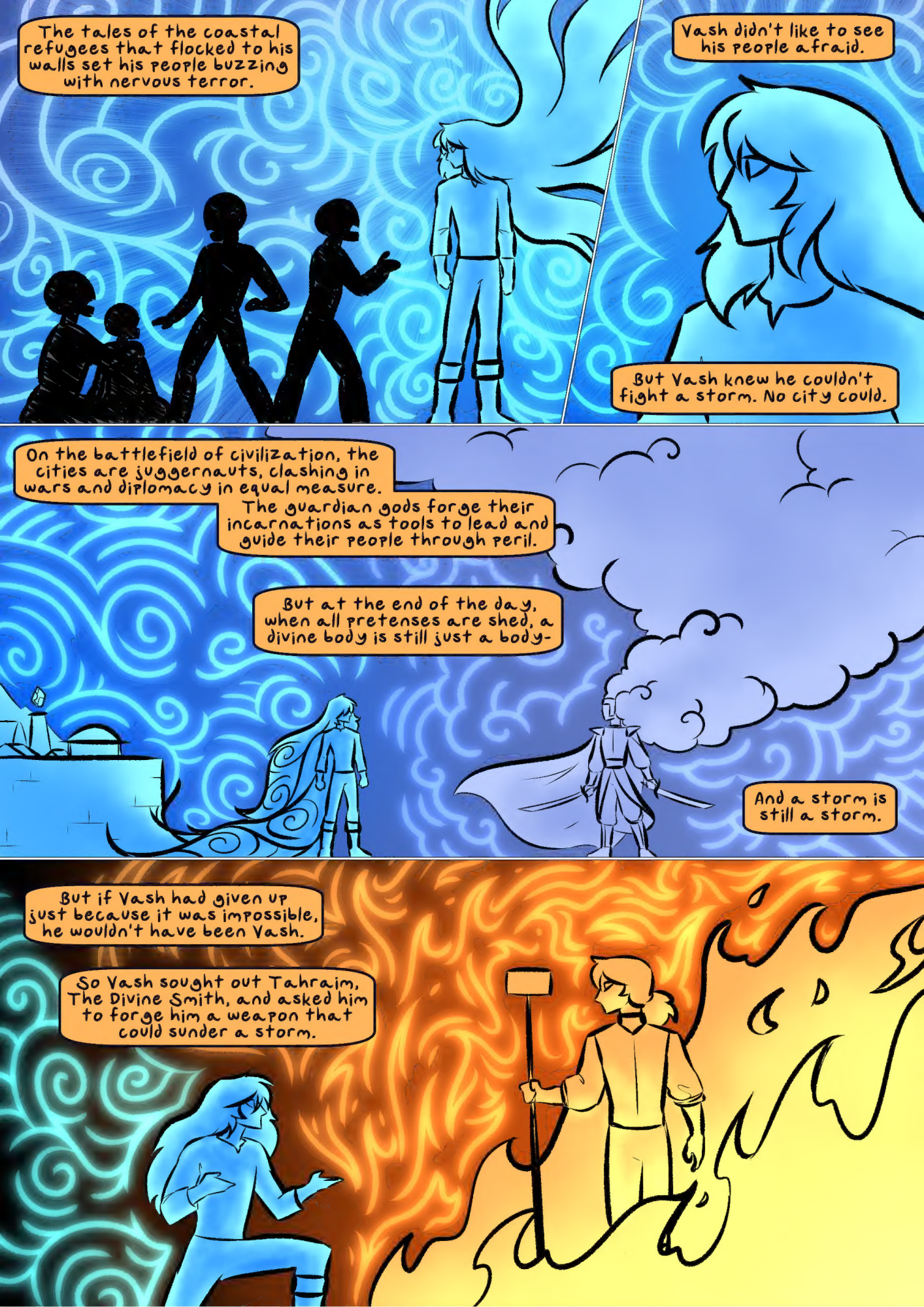
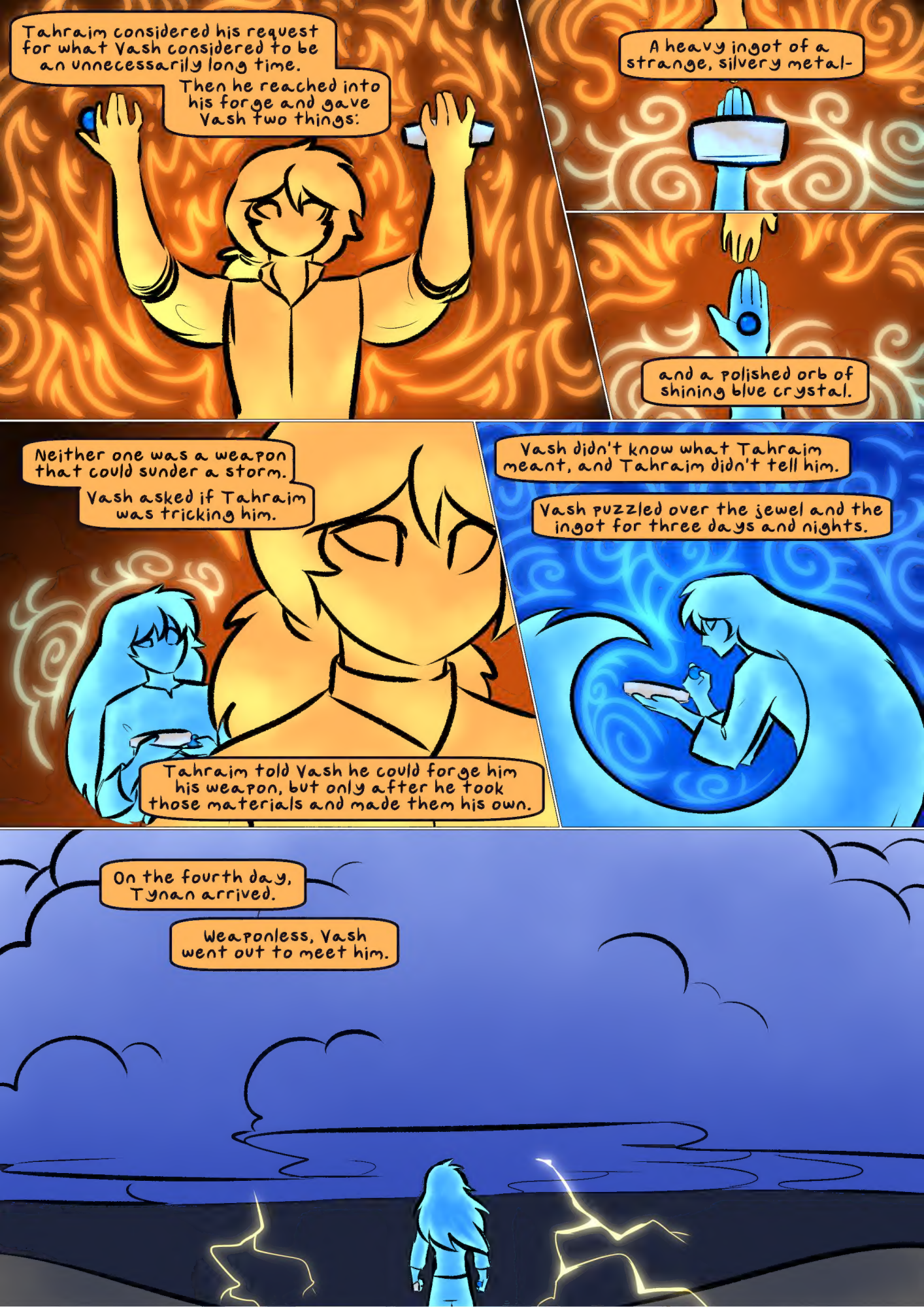
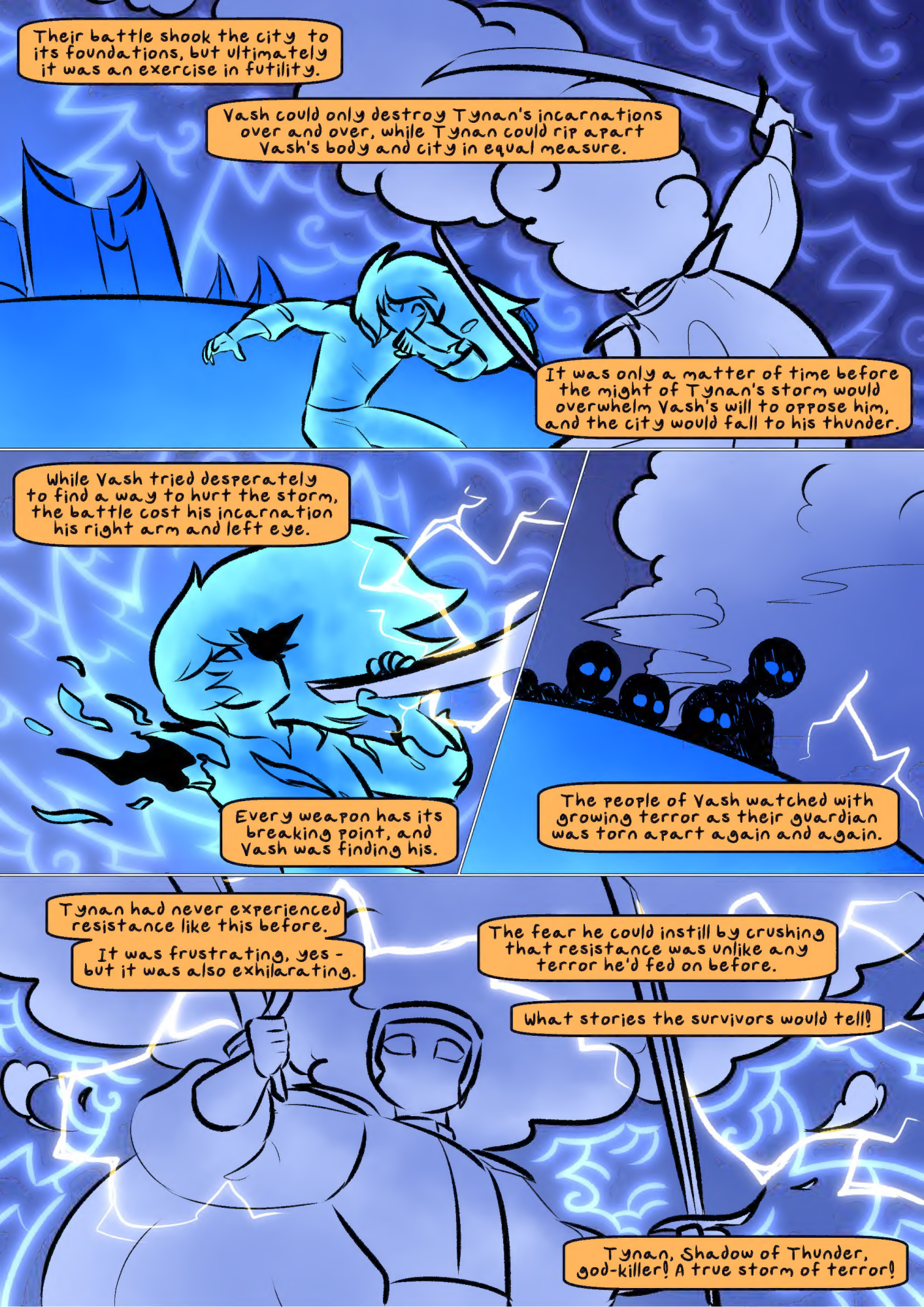
Chapter 12
Lawbringer

Let me tell you a story.
Don't worry - it's short.
Once upon a time, there was a storm.
It was not very unusual, as storms go.
It gusted, it thundered, it rained, as storms tend to do.
The only thing unusual about this particular storm was its cruelty.


The storm first learned its taste for fear when an incidental gust blew it over a populated area.
The wind and rain and thunder terrified the mortals, hammering on their shelters and drowning their crops.
The more they feared it, the stronger the storm became.
But when the people were all gone, the storm shrank again.
The storm didn't like being small.
So the storm moved on and found more people.
It waited on the horizon, darkening the sky and rumbling ominously in the night.
The people were confused.
Then they were worried.
Then they were afraid.
Then the clouds broke.


The tales of the coastal refugees that flocked to his walls set his people buzzing with nervous terror.
Vash didn't like to see his people afraid.
But Vash knew he couldn't fight a storm. No city could.
On the battlefield of civilization, the cities are juggernauts, clashing in wars and diplomacy in equal measure.
The guardian gods forge their incarnations as tools to lead and guide their people through peril.
But at the end of the day, when all pretenses are shed, a divine body is still just a body-
And a storm is still a storm.
But if Vash had given up just because it was impossible, he wouldn't have been Vash.
So Vash sought out Tahraim, The Divine Smith, and asked him to forge him a weapon that could sunder a storm.


Tahraim considered his request for what Vash considered to be an unnecessarily long time.
Then he reached into his forge and gave Vash two things:
A heavy ingot of a strange, silvery metal-
and a polished orb of shining blue crystal.
Neither one was a weapon that could sunder a storm.
Vash asked if Tahraim was tricking him.
Tahraim told Vash he could forge him his weapon, but only after he took those materials and made them his own.
Vash didn't know what Tahraim meant, and Tahraim didn't tell him.
Vash puzzled over the jewel and the ingot for three days and nights.
On the fourth day, Tynan arrived.
Weaponless, Vash went out to meet him.


Their battle shook the city to its foundations, but ultimately it was an exercise in futility.
Vash could only destroy Tynan's incarnations over and over, while Tynan could rip apart Vash's body and city in equal measure.
It was only a matter of time before the might of Tynan's storm would overwhelm Vash's will to oppose him, and the city would fall to his thunder.
While Vash tried desperately to find a way to hurt the storm, the battle cost his incarnation his right arm and left eye.
Every weapon has its breaking point, and Vash was finding his.
The people of Vash watched with growing terror as their guardian was torn apart again and again.
Tynan had never experienced resistance like this before.
It was frustrating, yes - but it was also exhilarating.
The fear he could instill by crushing that resistance was unlike any terror he'd fed on before.
What stories the survivors would tell!
Tynan, Shadow of Thunder, god-killer! A true storm of terror!

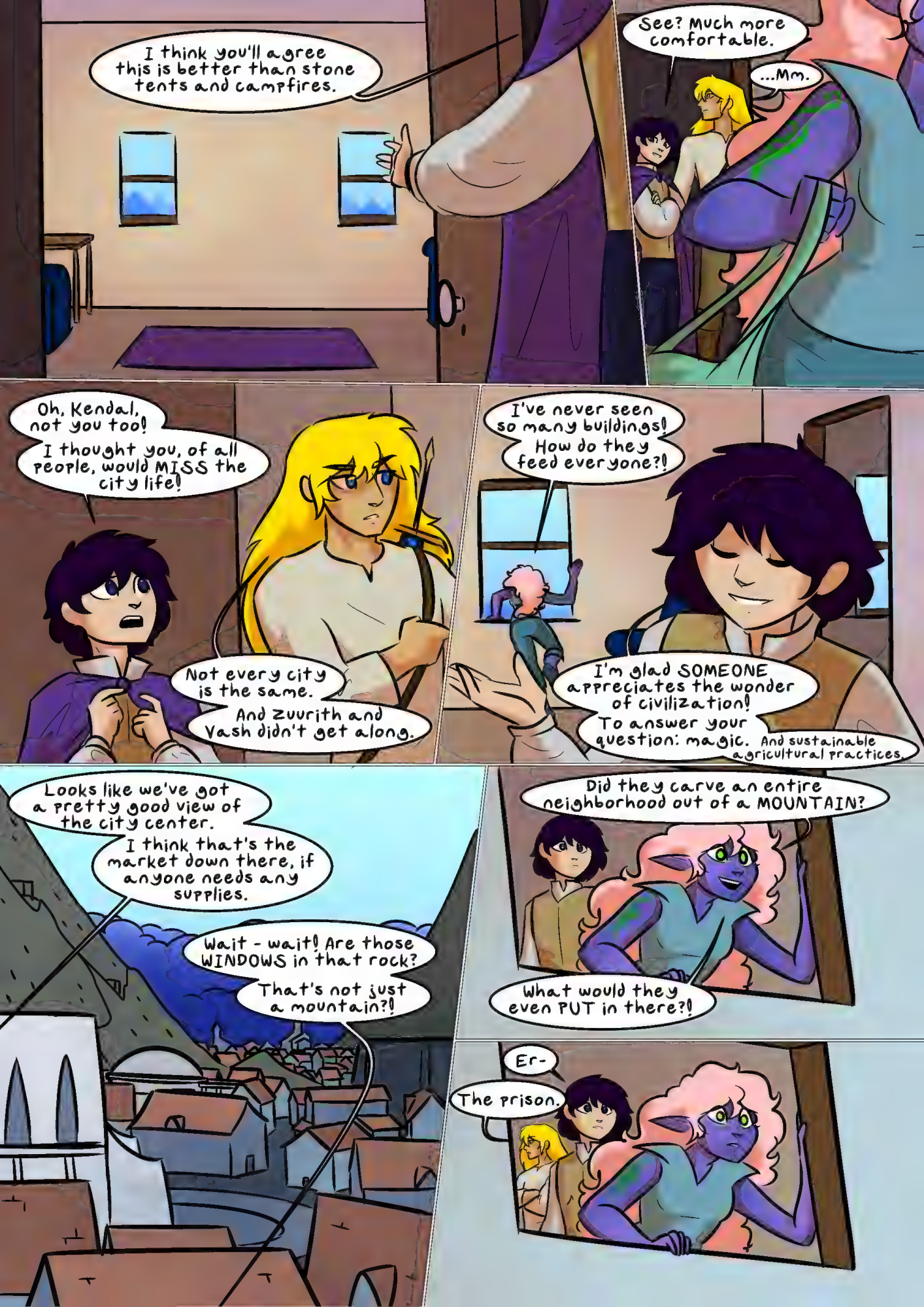
Weakened and fraying, barely holding his incarnation together, Vash contemplated Tahraim's words one final time.
Three days of frustrated fury burned away as Vash stared into the cool, silvery metal, and felt his soul slip inside it as comfortably as a glove.
Vash laughed, and for the first time in his existence, Tynan felt a terror that was all his own.
Vash rewove his incarnation before Tynan's very eyes.
The jewel blazed in place of his missing eye, and starmetal muscles coiled out from the shoulder of his missing arm.
Tynan's confidence boiled away with the rain.
Burning like a blue sun, Vash tore through Tynan's incarnation one final time, then turned his mismatched gaze to the clouds overhead.
With a single sweep of his silver hand, a brilliant burst of spiralling blue flame and a sound that defied description, Vash ripped Tynan's storm in two.

With a single, spectacular defeat, Tynan learned what all tyrants must eventually realize:
Fear only grants one power so long as one is fearsome.
Tynan's hold of terror was shattered, and his strength abandoned him as the mortals flocked to Vash, hero-god, savior of one city and defender of dozens more.
Before the broken storm could escape, Vash ensured he could never again harm the mortals Vash held so dear.
A warm breeze carried his scattered clouds away, and he has not darkened the shores since.
Bound by Vash's divine oath, Tynan was exiled to wander the oceans, never again casting his shadow on Vash's land or those he protected.
Vash returned the ingot and the jewel to Tahraim, who used them to forge the blade that Vash named Kendal, after the right hand it had so cunningly replaced.
Sounds like you were screwing with him.
Why didn't you just forge him the sword?

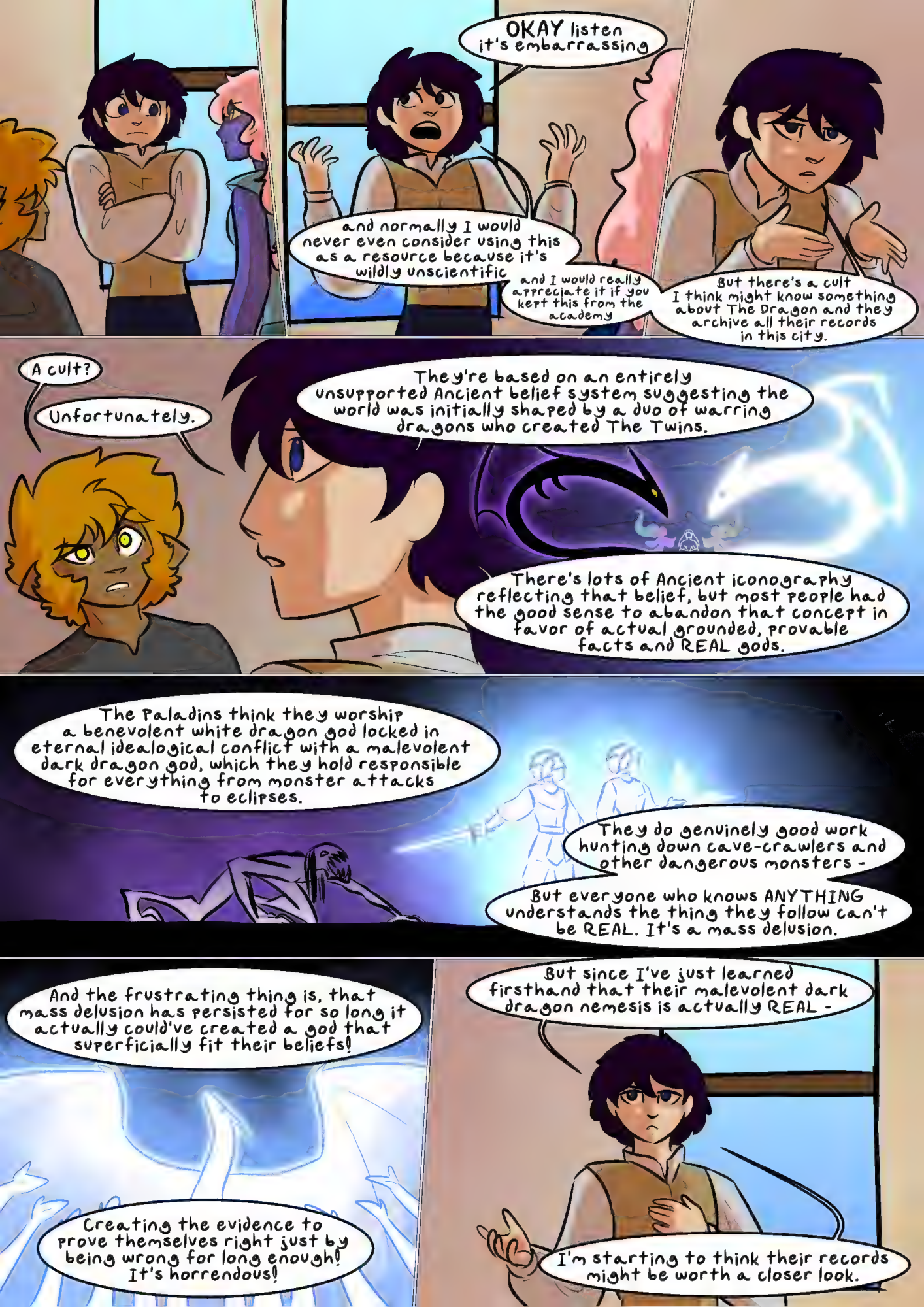
Because if I had, I'd have deprived him of a much better weapon.
He only realized the true potential of the starmetal under his city when I forced him to adapt.
Or you could've made him a starmetal sword and just TOLD him how to use it.
I take pride in my work, Caliban,
The sword alone would've been an inferior weapon.
Didn't his entire city nearly die because you were too busy playing riddle games?
Weapons can only be forged in fire.
GRNNNNH
Okay. I see what you're doing here, and I don't have time to indulge you.
Can you help me or not?
IT IS A SIMPLE YES-OR-NO QUESTION
I wish it were.
I can give you your weapon in time.
But if I intervene now-
It will never become what you need it to be.

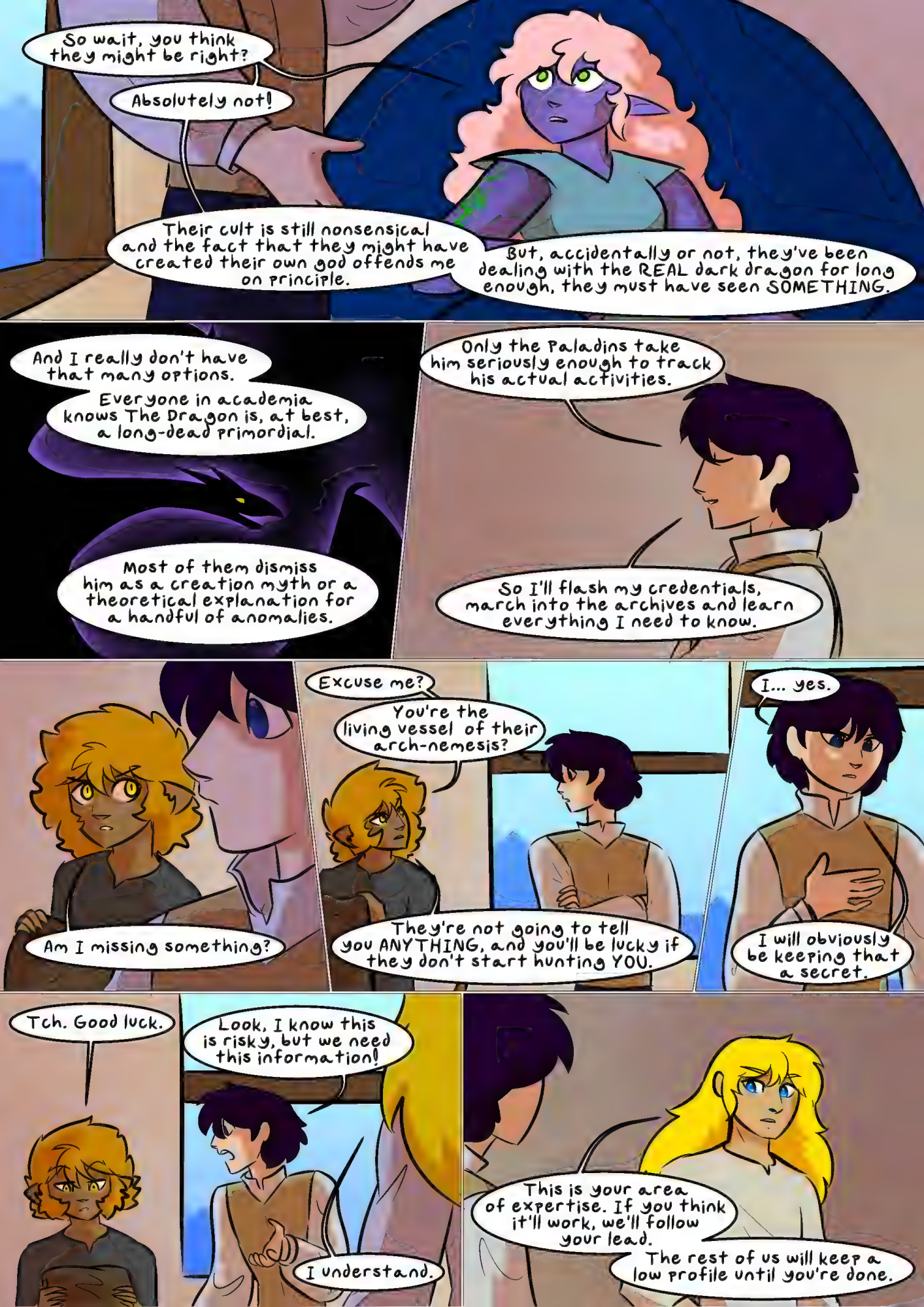
Ridiculous.
People temper at a more complicated pace than metal.
If you want him to do the impossible, we need him to believe he can.
Forcing his hand will convince him of the opposite. He'll believe he has no agency in his own life.
He ALREADY believes that!
If we don't prove him right, he'll soon realize otherwise.
Fear can only hold him back for so long.
Can we at least get him out of that stupid place?
He's stagnating.
If he were ready to leave, he'd walk out of there himself.
We can guide him, nudge him along.
But we can never force him.
...Fine.
So how do we nudge him?
Oh, we don't have to do anything.
At least four world-shaking powers are converging on his location in less than a sef.
He's about to be very nudged.
Twice-born son of a carrion crawler!
You HAD a plan this whole time?!
Of course. Although it's mostly just luck.
And only one of those powers is likely to be of much help to us.
I didn't set the divine blade on his current path, and I wouldn't dream of interfering now.
Watching him reforge himself is much too interesting.
But he's on track to find your stagnating champion -
And this particular weapon has proven himself quite adept at breaking molds.

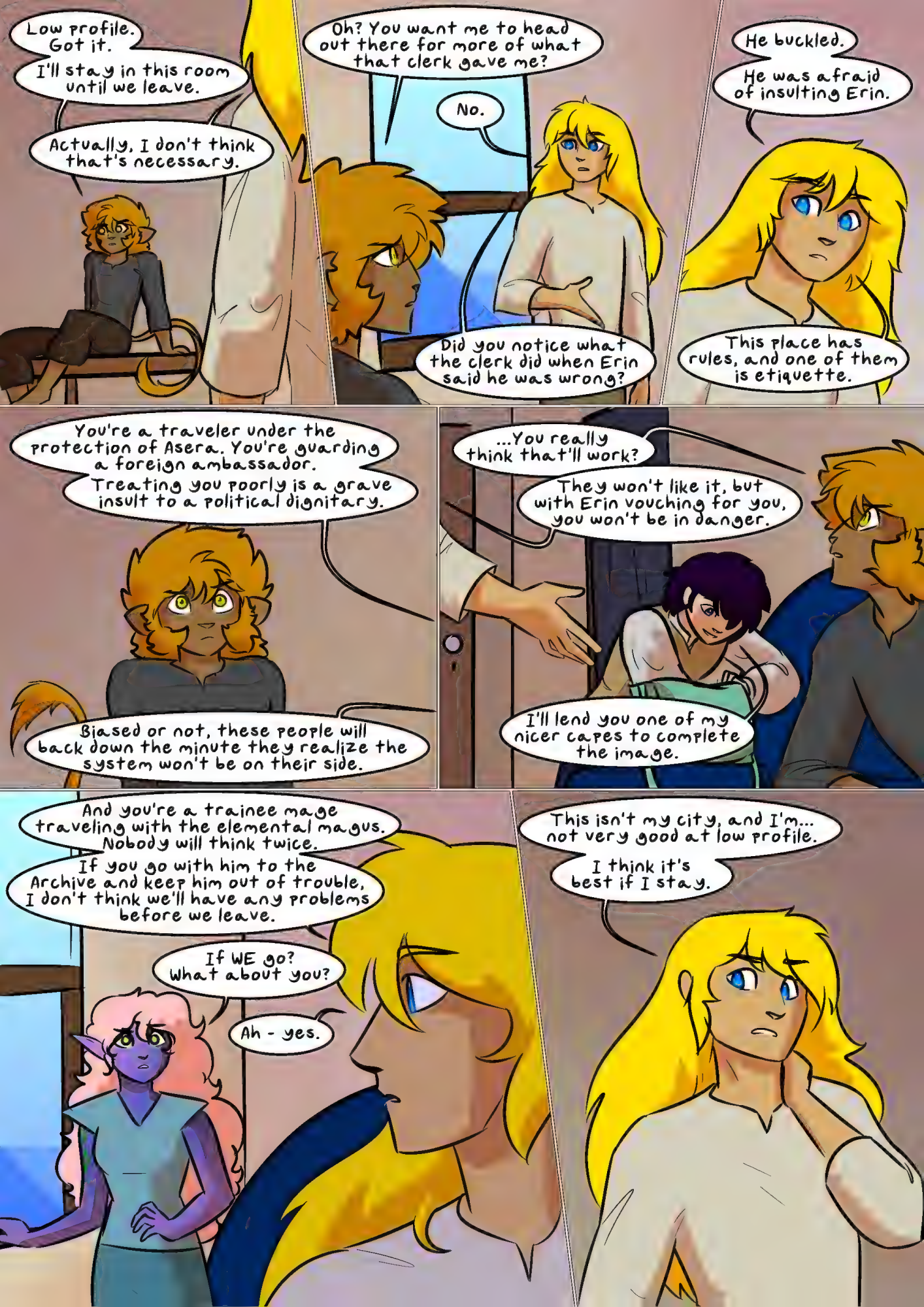
The ambassador suite, if you don't mind.
Of course, sir!
How long will your company be staying at our embassy?
Shouldn't be more than a sef. I'm just in town for a bit of research.
Exciting! I'm proud our city can assist the Elemental Magus!
Ah, naturally.
I'll allocate a room in the servant's quarters for your ferin attendant as well.
Ah.
No. Four beds in the ambassador suite will do nicely.
Oh - of course! My apologies for assuming.
Civilization at last.
It won't happen again.
We're finally back in MY world.
With me on your side, you're untouchable.

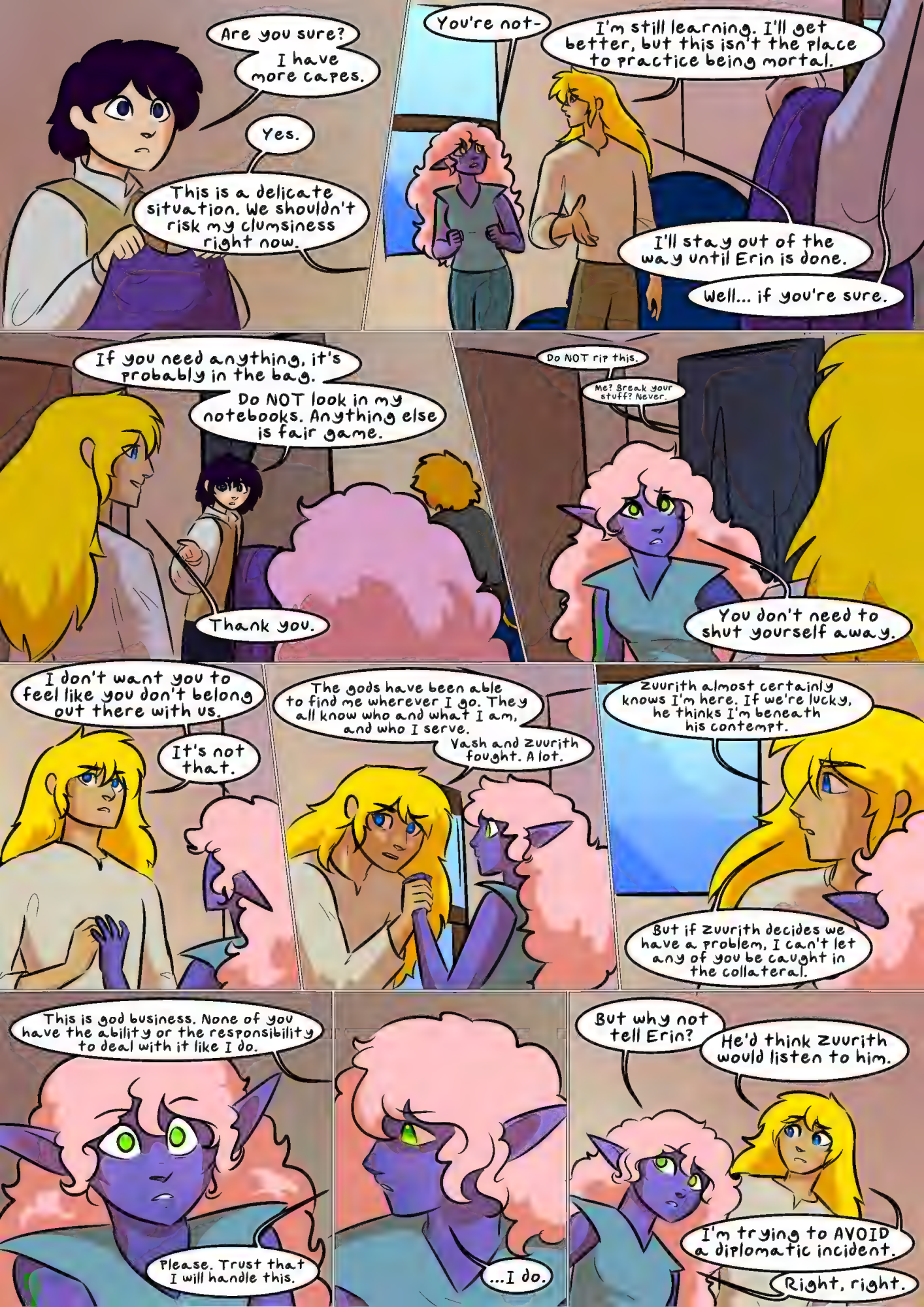

I think you'll agree this is better than stone tents and campfires.
See? Much more comfortable.
...Mm.
Oh, Kendal, not you too!
I thought you, of all people, would MISS the city life!
Not every city is the same.
And Zuvrith and Vash didn't get along.
I've never seen so many buildings! How do they feed everyone?!
I'm glad SOMEONE appreciates the wonder of civilization!
To answer your question: magic.
And sustainable agricultural practices.
Looks like we've got a pretty good view of the city center.
I think that's the market down there, if anyone needs any supplies.
Wait - wait! Are those WINDOWS in that rock?
That's not just a mountain?!
Did they carve an entire neighborhood out of a MOUNTAIN?
What would they even PUT in there?!
Er-
The prison.

A prison?
But... it's massive.
It has to be.
Zuurith Lawbringer tolerates no disorder.
Zuurith embodies a system of order and law that he believes is more important than any of the people he's meant to protect.
If his people don't follow his rules, they go in the prison, and are made productive to his system in other ways.
Even bandits and godless are imprisoned if they stray too close to his domain.
Prisoners earn time off their sentences through labor by producing the goods Zuurith exports.
Freedom is their reward for productivity and compliance.
Vash loves mortals for their chaotic individuality.
Zuurith seems to hate them for the same reason.
And you thought it was smart to bring US here?!
Hey, I'm not condoning any of this!
But I'm an honorary ambassador under the direct protection of Asera, and you're all my companions.
We couldn't be safer!
Erin...
Why are we here?


OKAY listen it's embarrassing
and normally I would never even consider using this as a resource because it's wildly unscientific
and I would really appreciate it if you kept this from the academy
But there's a cult I think might know something about The Dragon and they archive all their records in this city.
A cult?
Unfortunately.
They're based on an entirely unsupported Ancient belief system suggesting the world was initially shaped by a duo of warring dragons who created The Twins.
There's lots of Ancient iconography reflecting that belief, but most people had the good sense to abandon that concept in favor of actual grounded, provable facts and REAL gods.
The Paladins think they worship a benevolent white dragon god locked in eternal idealogical conflict with a malevolent dark dragon god, which they hold responsible for everything from monster attacks to eclipses.
They do genuinely good work hunting down cave-crawlers and other dangerous monsters -
But everyone who knows ANYTHING understands the thing they follow can't be REAL. It's a mass delusion.
And the frustrating thing is, that mass delusion has persisted for so long it actually could've created a god that superficially fit their beliefs!
Creating the evidence to prove themselves right just by being wrong for long enough! It's horrendous!
But since I've just learned firsthand that their malevolent dark dragon nemesis is actually REAL -
I'm starting to think their records might be worth a closer look.


So wait, you think they might be right?
Absolutely not!
Their cult is still nonsensical and the fact that they might have created their own god offends me on principle.
But, accidentally or not, they've been dealing with the REAL dark dragon for long enough, they must have seen SOMETHING.
And I really don't have that many options.
Everyone in academia knows The Dragon is, at best, a long-dead primordial.
Most of them dismiss him as a creation myth or a theoretical explanation for a handful of anomalies.
Only the Paladins take him seriously enough to track his actual activities.
So I'll flash my credentials, march into the archives and learn everything I need to know.
Am I missing something?
Excuse me?
You're the living vessel of their arch-nemesis?
They're not going to tell you ANYTHING, and you'll be lucky if they don't start hunting YOU.
I... yes.
I will obviously be keeping that a secret.
Tch. Good luck.
Look, I know this is risky, but we need this information!
I understand.
This is your area of expertise. If you think it'll work, we'll follow your lead.
The rest of us will keep a low profile until you're done.


Low profile. Got it.
I'll stay in this room until we leave.
Actually, I don't think that's necessary.
Oh? You want me to head out there for more of what that clerk gave me?
No.
Did you notice what the clerk did when Erin said he was wrong?
He buckled.
He was afraid of insulting Erin.
This place has rules, and one of them is etiquette.
You're a traveler under the protection of Asera. You're guarding a foreign ambassador.
Treating you poorly is a grave insult to a political dignitary.
Biased or not, these people will back down the minute they realize the system won't be on their side.
...You really think that'll work?
They won't like it, but with Erin vouching for you, you won't be in danger.
I'll lend you one of my nicer capes to complete the image.
And you're a trainee mage traveling with the elemental magus. Nobody will think twice.
If you go with him to the Archive and keep him out of trouble, I don't think we'll have any problems before we leave.
If WE go? What about you?
Ah - yes.
This isn't my city, and I'm... not very good at low profile.
I think it's best if I stay.


Are you sure? I have more capes.
Yes.
This is a delicate situation. We shouldn't risk my clumsiness right now.
You're not-
I'm still learning. I'll get better, but this isn't the place to practice being mortal.
I'll stay out of the way until Erin is done.
Well... if you're sure.
If you need anything, it's probably in the bag.
Do NOT look in my notebooks. Anything else is fair game.
Thank you.
Do NOT rip this.
Me? Break your stuff? Never.
You don't need to shut yourself away.
I don't want you to feel like you don't belong out there with us.
It's not that.
The gods have been able to find me wherever I go. They all know who and what I am, and who I serve.
Vash and Zuurith fought. A lot.
Zuurith almost certainly knows I'm here. If we're lucky, he thinks I'm beneath his contempt.
But if Zuurith decides we have a problem, I can't let any of you be caught in the collateral.
This is god business. None of you have the ability or the responsibility to deal with it like I do.
Please. Trust that I will handle this.
...I do.
But why not tell Erin?
He'd think Zuurith would listen to him.
I'm trying to AVOID a diplomatic incident.
Right, right.

I'll keep them out of trouble, but you need to promise to stay out of trouble, too.
It's not really up to me.
But I'll do my best.
If you REALLY want to sell it, you should wear shoes.
You need to be very special to me to make me sacrifice my mobility.
We'll be back soon.

Yeah, that's definitely not moving right.
HEY!
What?
You can't be up there!
What??
I said you can't be UP there! That's
Sorry, I can't hear you!
You're really far away for some reason!
BYE!
Ugh.
Send to Captain Vienne. Message follows. We have a climbing trespasser who thinks she's hilarious. Message ends.
I think Mira mentioned seeing someone on the roof on her morning patrol too.
She'd better knock it off before the arena sets a bounty.

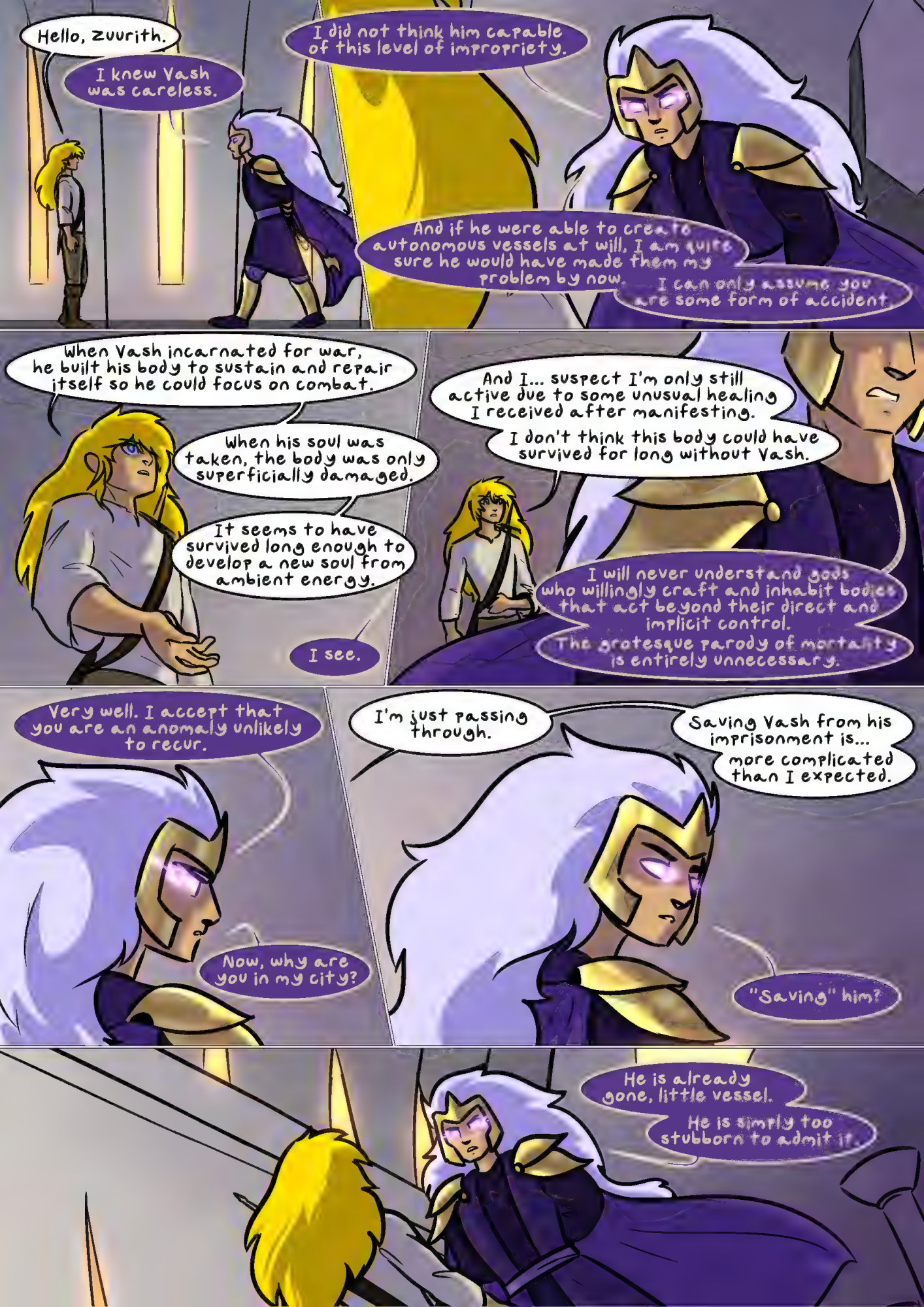
Let's see. Who do I talk to about this?
This city doesn't seem too friendly to-
SCRRAK
HEY!
WHOOP
SKID
And here we are.
CRASH

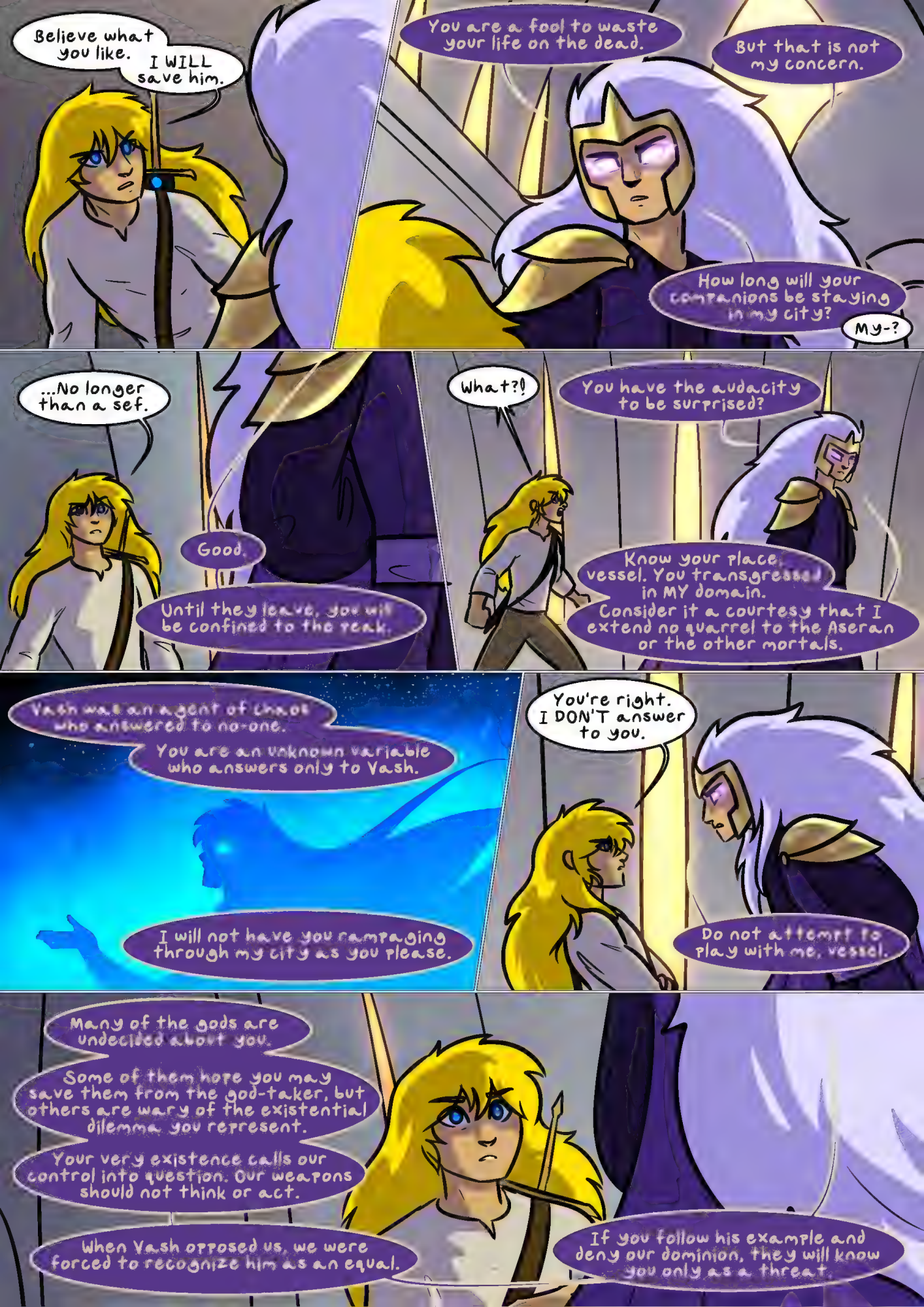
After you.
Why thank you, faithful steward.
Don't push it.
UUUUGH
Hello there.
Who do I speak to about gaining access to your hall of records?

You don't.
The records aren't open to the public.
Ah, understandable. But, as you can see from my sigil, I am NOT the public.
Uh huh.
I'm on a research trip from the Aseran academy-
All right, let me rephrase.
The records aren't open to anyone who's not a Paladin.
But I-
Am I not being clear enough?
We are not a public library.
SNRK
I am an honorary ambassador for Asera. Surely there must be an exception!
Take it up with Zuurith if it matters that much to you.
Maybe he'll break the rules if you ask him nicely.
Perhaps you should find me your superior!
The head archivist will be supervising tomorrow if you want to hear it again, only louder!

I apologize for the intrusion, and the... strangeness of this inquiry.
Are you the former vessel of Vash?
I am.
Ah.
I am Pryder, diplomatic emissary of Zuurith.
He would like a word with you.

So it is true.


Hello, Zuurith.
I knew Vash was careless.
I did not think him capable of this level of impropriety.
And if he were able to create autonomous vessels at will, I am quite sure he would have made them my problem by now.
I can only assume you are some form of accident.
When Vash incarnated for war, he built his body to sustain and repair itself so he could focus on combat.
When his soul was taken, the body was only superficially damaged.
It seems to have survived long enough to develop a new soul from ambient energy.
I see.
And I... suspect I'm only still active due to some unusual healing I received after manifesting.
I don't think this body could have survived for long without Vash.
I will never understand gods who willingly craft and inhabit bodies that act beyond their direct and implicit control.
The grotesque parody of mortality is entirely unnecessary.
Very well. I accept that you are an anomaly unlikely to recur.
Now, why are you in my city?
I'm just passing through.
Saving Vash from his imprisonment is... more complicated than I expected.
"Saving" him?
He is already gone, little vessel.
He is simply too stubborn to admit it.


Believe what you like.
I WILL save him.
You are a fool to waste your life on the dead.
But that is not my concern.
How long will your companions be staying in my city?
My-?
...No longer than a sef.
Good.
Until they leave, you will be confined to the reak.
What?!
You have the audacity to be surprised?
Know your place, vessel. You transgressed in MY domain.
Consider it a courtesy that I extend no quarrel to the Aseran or the other mortals.
Vash was an agent of chaos who answered to no-one.
You are an unknown variable who answers only to Vash.
I will not have you rampaging through my city as you please.
You're right. I DON'T answer to you.
Do not attempt to play with me, vessel.
Many of the gods are undecided about you.
Some of them hope you may save them from the god-taker, but others are wary of the existential dilemma you represent.
Your very existence calls our control into question. Our weapons should not think or act.
When Vash opposed us, we were forced to recognize him as an equal.
If you follow his example and deny our dominion, they will know you only as a threat.

I don't know how they'll judge me, but I remember how they talked about you.
You like to pretend you embody some archetypical principle of law.
Like the other cities are inferior reflections of you, just waiting for you to show them the right way to rule.
I don't think you have as much influence as you believe.
Are you willing to stake your future on that?
I thought not.
Your people?

That was beautiful.
No, really.
It's a real privilege to witness the art of diplomacy up close.
please stop talking
I'm sorry they wouldn't let you in.
mm.
But it WAS really funny when you said "show me where that's written down"-
gnnnnngh
-and she pointed to the sign right behind her.
This place just keeps getting better!
What... was THAT?
A lot of people yelling at once.
Are we in trouble?
Probably not. It's a little way off.
Most likely some city thing that's got nothing to do with us.
Should we check it out?
Erin?
leave me to my suffering
Yeah, let's do it.

Is that...?
Could be a lot of things.
Maybe it's a really big open-air theater and they're putting on a play.
Really?
Cover me.
I'll check.

Oh! Did you see them too? I think I saw them heading towards that tower over there!
Ah - are you sure?
I don't know, it was all very fast!
HEY! WHO'S UP THERE?
I don't know WHAT'S going on today!

YARGH!!
WHAM
Civilization.
Stay down.

No surrender today.
Boss's orders.
And no more holding back.
...Do you think he's stuck up there?
Gah!
SOP

Should've just played by the rules.
CRACK
At least you'll finally give 'em a good show.
CRACK
FALST! Get down here!
!!
SKND
CRASH
Erin, do you know what "cover me" means?
Because that wasn't it.
What's going on in there?
Bloodsport.
They've got some guy facing off against an elephant shifter.
I hope it's staged, or else he's-
Both of you, shush!

This missive is intended for
The Aseran Emissary.
I am Pryder, diplomatic emissary of Zuurith.
I apologize for the intrusion. I hope that this message clarifies its necessity.
Uh, nice to meet you?
It's a recording. He can't hear you.
Go ahead.
Hey, Erin.
Kendal?
First of all, I'm all right, so please don't do anything rash.
But our time here just got a bit more complicated...